

THE DYING OF THE LIGHT



INTERVAL

JASON
KRISTOPHER

THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

Interval



By Jason Kristopher



grey gecko press

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First Edition

*To all my fans, those I know well
and those I've yet to meet.*

*And to my fellow Geckos,
who have all taken this long, strange trip with me.*

CHARACTERS OF NOTE

Military Personnel

McMurdo Station

Maj Bill Shaw, Command Pilot, USAF

Lt Mark Evans, Co-pilot, USAF

Lt Timothy Fraser, First Pilot, USAF

Staff Sgt Charles Keith, Chief Loadmaster, USAF

2nd Lt Rodrigo Lopez, Flight Engineer, USAF

Bunker One

Col Kimberly Blake, Special Forces, CO

Cpt Marcus Potter, US Army

Alpha Squad

David Blake, XO

Gunnery Sgt Dalton Gaines, USMC MSOR

Cpt Tom Reynolds, US Air Force 1st Spec Ops Wing

Lt Johnathan Barnes, USMC MSOR

Lt Jake Powell, SEAL

Lt Elizabeth Montero, USMC MSOR

Cpt Nathan Armstrong, Special Forces

Bravo Squad

Cpt Angelo Martinez, Ranger

Petty Off 2nd Class Edward Ames, SEAL

Cpt Janet Turner, USAF 1st Spec Ops Wing

Sgt Arkady Ivanovich, Special Forces

Lt Adrian Masters, SEAL

Sgt Joshua Barrents, Special Forces

Sgt Samuel Techman, USAF 1st Spec Ops Wing

CHARACTERS OF NOTE

Bunker Four

Maj Malcolm Dagger, USMC MSOR, CO

Bunker Seven

Brig Gen George Maxwell, Ranger, AEGIS CO

Bunker Eight

Captain Frank Anderson, SEAL, AEGIS XO

Sgt. Douglas Mahoney, Army

Non-Military Personnel

McMurdo Station

Dr. Jim Atkins, Geneticist

Jennifer Michaelson, US Marshal

Dr. Sabrina Tanner, Communications

Dr. Jack Warner, Director

Bunker One

Angela Gates, Governor

Daniel Taylor, Governor's Assistant

Others

Arthur Beoshane, Rebel Leader, Seattle Ruins

Driebach, Rebel Officer, Seattle Ruins

Dr. Mary Maxwell, Research, AEGIS, Bunker Seven

Arturo Onevás, Administrator, Marambío Base

ACRONYMS

AEGIS	Advanced Experimental Genetics Intelligence Service
ACU	Army Combat Uniform
CO	Commanding Officer of a unit/group
ICV	Infantry Combat Vehicle
NVD	Night Vision Device
REAPR	Real-time Enemy Assessors and Physiology Readers
USAMRIID	United States Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases
XO	Executive Officer: second in command of a unit/group
Z-DAY	The day the world at large was informed of the existence of walkers, through a speech by the US president

PROLOGUE

Becoming a zombie was much more painful than he had expected.

He'd assumed it would be a momentary pain, and then... nothing. He would be gone, a mindless monster.

Instead, he felt every stretched sinew, pulled taut from endless cramps. Every torn and bruised muscle, worked beyond endurance. Every cough and rattle, as his tongue rasped against a throat gone dry from screaming.

Pain was a constant companion to him, a seemingly old and dear friend reminding him that he was still, against all odds and hope, miserably alive. He longed for death with each passing second, the sweet release of oblivion calling to him as if she were the most earnest of lovers, and he wanted nothing more than to fall into her arms, to rest at long last.

But the hunger... dear God, the hunger.

It gnawed at him, the core of his being turned and twisted into a craven and craving beast, possessed by a singular, overpowering urge to rip and tear into the sweet, sweet flesh of anything and everything that came within grasp of the claws that had replaced his fingers.

The hunger did not come without its own benefits, however. It began to supersede the pain, not to extinguish the horrific agony but rather to embrace it, to enfold it and make it a part of itself. The hunger made the agony a part of who he was now, who he would forever be.

There in the dark, his mind ran screaming.

Whether it was months, days, or only seconds later when he came back to himself, he couldn't tell. He knew only that the hunger had gone from crippling to merely frustrating. He knew, on some level, that it would never leave him completely now, but at least he was able to function, able to think.

He sat up on the narrow bunk built into the wall. Raising one hand against the glare of the overhead fluorescent lights, he saw clearly for the first time in who knew how long, and noticed the gloves that encased his hands and the dark robe-like clothes he'd been given. A flickering at the edge of his vision gave away the presence of a hood, and his feet were in heavy black boots.

He stood, wavering a little as his equilibrium adjusted. Shaking his head to clear it, he took another look around. The bars of what was obviously a cell gave him a view of a corridor and nothing else. He noticed the lack of any reflective surfaces, and his mind shied away from the thought of what he might look like now.

He took a few cautious steps, and as the world ceased spinning around him, he realized that he felt stronger than he ever had before. Not just stronger, but better, faster, more powerful. The leather of his gloves creaked as he clenched a fist in wonder, the pain presented by the action merely background white noise, thanks to his mind's defensive filtering.

He was just ready to start yelling for the guard he assumed was nearby when a man in a US Army uniform strode into view on the opposite side of the bars, a nondescript aide following close behind.

"I see you've survived," said the man in uniform, smiling coldly. "That's good, even if it did cost us the others in the process."

He tried to speak, to ask the uniformed man where he was, who he was, and what had been done to him, but he couldn't form the words. His damaged throat would not comply with his wishes, so he was left standing mute before the shorter man, who now held up a hand.

"No, no. Don't bother. You're not ready yet. You've got some healing to do." He frowned, crossing his arms. "I suppose I can't very well call you 'thing,' so let's find out your name, shall we?" He

snapped his fingers, and the aide handed him a slim folder, which he opened and scanned. “Ah, here it is.”

He snapped the folder closed and handed it back to the aide, moving forward to look at the man in black a bit closer, yet still well out of range of the bars. “You and I have a lot to discuss, Mr. Driebach.”

CHAPTER ONE

Over the Southern Ocean

Z-Day -6 days

“So, what’d they promise you, Fraser?”

Fraser didn’t turn from the controls of the C-5M Super Galaxy as he answered the co-pilot, Lieutenant Mark Evans. “Promise me?”

“Yeah, what’d they promise you to get you to fly to the ass end of the world trading supplies for a load of half-frozen civilian scientists? I heard we’ve been losing guys like us left and right, what with those superflu crazies.”

Lieutenant Timothy Fraser finally looked over. “I was ordered to fly, so I flew.”

“Yeah, but what about your family, man?”

Fraser shook his head and did his instrument check. “Don’t have any.”

“None? What about a girlfriend?”

“She left me—said I loved planes more than her.” Fraser glanced over at Evans. “She was right.”

“All right, Fraser, Evans, cut the chatter,” said Major Bill Shaw, the C-5’s command pilot, as he walked onto the flight deck. He’d been in his rack for the last two hours, but you’d never have known it to look at him—his uniform was neat and tidy and he was well groomed. He took a long sip from a mug of hot coffee, the aroma of it perking up everyone on the flight deck. “Where are we?”

Evans spoke up first. “We’re about an hour out, sir.”

Shaw had over twenty years experience flying these big bastards, and he wasn’t about to lose one now. “Good, good. Get on

the horn and make sure we're not heading into a shitstorm down there."

"Yes, sir," said Evans.

Shaw looked over the notes of the flight engineer, Second Lieutenant Rodrigo Lopez, checking for anything out of the ordinary. "Looks good, Lopez. Go grab some joe, and some for these yahoos, too."

"Yes, sir," Lopez said, clipping his log to his station before heading to the galley.

Shaw gave a final glance at the cockpit, then headed down to the cargo deck, passing through the mostly empty passenger compartment on his way to the rear service ladder. There was only a single scientist in the passenger compartment, already bundled up in his cold gear and passed out. Shaw shook his head and snorted. *Civilians*, he thought. *Can't get used to the noise and the cold. Going to be a long flight for him!*

The cargo bay was even colder. Pallets, drums, and other containers of cargo filled every square inch of space, and on a C-5, that was a *lot* of inches. Looking around, he finally spotted the loadmaster Charlie Keith off to the side, checking a strap.

"How we doin', Charlie?" he asked, knocking on the wooden crate next to the tall, super-skinny loadmaster.

"Fine, sir. Just fine. She's packed to the gills, but we'll make it..." Charlie trailed off as he looked down the long cargo bay. "At least, I think we will, sir."

"You *think* we'll make it?"

"Well, sir, it's just that some of these materials are... well, dangerous, sir."

"I thought you cleared everything."

"I did, sir. I'm not saying there's anything against regs on board. Just... well, some of it makes me nervous, that's all."

"Charlie, if there was something out there that *didn't* make you nervous, I'd be surprised," said Shaw with a smile.

Charlie grinned. "Yes, sir, I know, sir."

"How's the President?"

"Not good, sir. I suggested he get some rack, but he didn't want to. Said he could handle it. I didn't want to make it an order, but... well, he's pretty bad off, sir."

"Any idea how he got sick?"

“No, sir. He was like this when he got onboard.”

“He tell you anything?”

“Nope. Just that he’d gone off-base for a personal matter.”

Shaw glowered. Off-base jaunts had been canceled for weeks. “A ‘personal matter,’ eh? Probably some girl in the city.” He noticed Charlie was looking even more uncomfortable than usual, and sighed. “Never mind, Charlie. Where’s he at? I’ll check up on him.”

“He’s just down the other row, sir,” said Charlie, pointing.

Shaw nodded, throwing back the last of the sugary coffee in his mug. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it. Just keep an eye on those ‘dangerous’ things you mentioned, clear?”

“Crystal, sir.”

Shaw moved into the next row, looking for the other on-duty loadmaster, the man with the unlikely name of Franklin Delano Roosevelt—hence his nickname, ‘The President.’ He finally spotted the big man, hunkered down near one of the pallets of frozen meat they were transporting. The irony of bringing frozen *anything* to Antarctica was not lost on the greying pilot. He gently put a hand on Franklin’s shoulder.

“How you doin’, son?” he asked quietly.

Franklin started, as though he hadn’t heard Shaw tramping over the metal grating, and stood up. At six feet four inches, he was not a small man, and he was almost as wide as he was tall. Barrel-chested didn’t quite seem to cover it. Shaw knew only a little from his file: born in southern L.A.’s Willowbrook neighborhood to a black preacher and his devout wife, Franklin was only a stone’s throw from Compton, but he’d managed to avoid getting sucked into the gang life and found his way out through the Air Force.

“I’m not doin’ too hot, sir,” said Franklin, coughing. “Just can’t seem to get cooled down. It’s so *hot* in here!”

Shaw wasn’t one to worry about nothing, but when one of his men started complaining about the heat in the cargo area of a plane most of the way to Antarctica, it was a bad sign.

“Look, Franklin, why don’t you get some rest. Hit your rack, son.” The loadmaster started to object, but Shaw cut him off. “That’s an order.”

Franklin finally nodded, then moved toward the ladder as Shaw went to the wall intercom and called the flight deck. “Lopez, go wake Rhinehardt. Tell him he’s pulling some extra duty today.”

“Yes, sir.”

Shaw looked over the cargo bay. Even the overhead lights were having a hard time getting down between the boxes. *They really packed the stuff in here*, he thought. *Operation Deep Freeze. What a pain in my ass. At least this is the last trip to McMurdo Station of the season. Not that a bird full of scientists who haven't seen the world in a year will be any better.*

Marambío Base Argentine Antarctica

The hundred-thousand-pound C-130 Hercules wasn't idling—it was chomping at the bit, ready for its pilot to let the four spinning propellers claw their way into the air. The same pilot—Matías—who was fighting on the flight deck, yards away from the controls, trying to escape Antarctica.

“Stand down, Matías! We cannot leave. There's nothing to go back to anymore,” his leader, Arturo Onevás, shouted.

“I'm going home, Arturo. I'm going to see my wife and children before they die! The superflu is killing everyone. I won't let that happen to them!” Matías, the bigger man, landed a solid punch to Arturo's jaw, sending him flying backward into the bulkhead.

Arturo landed with a loud clang and groaned. He put a hand to the back of his head. It came away bloody, and he looked up at Matías with scorn evident in every line of his features.

Matías leaned over with an outstretched hand. “At least there we have a chance, *amigo*. At least there we can choose death on our own terms, rather than waiting to freeze.”

Arturo ignored him, pushing himself to his feet against the bulkhead. “Fine, go. Abandon your post.” He looked around at the other men, watching from a safe distance. “You know what is waiting for you back there. The dead, the dying, and the rumors... rumors that not all of the dead are *staying* dead. If you go back, you too will die. All of you!”

Arturo moved toward the hatch. As he stood at the doorway, he took one final look at the twenty-three men who were leaving—nearly half of his people. Some of them were men he needed to stay: engineers, mechanics, one of his two doctors—even the psychiatrist was going.

He shook his head and spat at their feet. “Leave, cowards. You’re no longer welcome here. Don’t come back,” he said, straightening as he stepped out of the plane onto the rock and gravel of the runway.

He didn’t look back as he heard the hatch slam; he just clutched his parka closer and held a hand to the wound on his scalp. Getting inside was paramount now, as a bleeding wound in sub-zero temperatures would cause hypothermia in record time. The engines of the big plane roared behind him, and he paid no attention as the ground vibrated beneath his feet.

He reached his truck and got in, seeing the plane finally get off the ground as he gunned the engine. His engine sputtered a bit, threatening to stall, but he feathered the gas, gave a quick finger to the departing plane, and roared off toward the base infirmary.

A few minutes later, he was inside.

“I’m fine, Diego. Just patch me up, please,” he said to the burly medic. He was soon cursing as the hydrogen peroxide killed whatever bugs might have survived the harsh Antarctic cold, and then wincing as Diego applied a bandage. He refrained from saying anything about the rough treatment, because Diego had a nasty temper, and he was the last medic they had.

“Is it true?” Diego asked. “Did they take the plane and leave?”

Arturo sighed. “Yes.”

“Then we have no way home.”

“Our government will come for us, Diego. I promise. I’ve already received assurances...”

Diego seemed to be listening at first as Arturo ran through all the platitudes his superiors had ordered him to give the men, but eventually he turned away to clean up the bloody remnants of the bandages he’d used to stop the bleeding.

Arturo finally stopped talking to Diego, knowing that his words were falling on deaf ears. “*Madre de Dios, qué haremos nosotros ahora?*” he whispered to himself. *What will we do now?*

Zhongshan (Sun Yat-Sen) Station Antarctica

“Stop!” Jiayi Sun steadied his aim, hoping that the running figure would stop, yet knowing that it wouldn’t.

“Jiayi, don’t!” Li screamed. “You can’t!”

He ignored her. As the administrator for the base, this was his duty, drilled into him by his instructors—to prevent the spread of infection by any means necessary, to safeguard the people under his command. It didn’t matter *why* the man wanted to leave, just that he did.

And, more importantly, that he’d wanted to take others with him.

Jiayi found himself without fear, without remorse or guilt. Deshi had brought this on himself. He was a traitor to his people, to his home, to their way of life.

The round caught the fleeing man just under his right shoulder blade and he spun around and collapsed into the snow.

Li pounded on Jiayi’s chest, his arms, his back. The administrator simply stood there, the pistol he’d used to kill the fleeing scientist hanging smoking and still in his hand. He didn’t feel her blows, didn’t even acknowledge her existence. He might have been carved out of the ice all around them for all the impact she was having on him.

She panted as her anger began to dissipate, and she collapsed to her knees and put her face in her hands.

Jiayi finally broke out of his stillness, looking at her in her anguish. He felt nothing for her now, though he had cared deeply for her, once. She was only slightly better than the traitor to him. Even though he knew in his heart that she had helped plan the now-aborted escape, he could not prove it, and she was too valuable to the state to lose so foolishly as this. *Deshi, on the other hand...*

He shook his head to clear the remaining cobwebs and turned to go inside. “Li, you must return to your duties. I require your usual daily report in one hour.” He didn’t wait to see if she would acknowledge him. If she did her job, there was no problem. If she didn’t... well, there would be no problem then, either.

He still had fourteen more bullets in the gun.

McMurdo Station Antarctica

“Easy... easy... there we go,” said Major Shaw as he brought the C-5 down on McMurdo Station’s annually-created Ice Runway.

McMurdo was a civilian science research center funded by the National Science Foundation. In support of their bases on the continent and as part of the United States Antarctic Program, the US Air Force and other military units transported supplies from the outside world to McMurdo for a brief period each year. As the largest station on Antarctica, McMurdo received most of the supplies and personnel, which were then distributed to the other, smaller bases on the continent—even some of the foreign bases.

The plane slewed a bit to the side, but Shaw made the necessary adjustments to the landing gear, straightening the jet and bringing her to a stop.

Evans began an address over the loudspeakers. “Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of USAF Airlines, welcome to Hell on ice. Again. Please remain in your seats until the major has brought the aircraft to a full and complete stop at the gate, and, as always, we thank you for choosing us today. Stay warm!” Evans grinned, unbuckled his straps, and stood, stretching. He glanced over at the major, who was focused on the post-flight checklist. Then he looked at Fraser, who merely shook his head. “What? Not even a chuckle?”

“Evans,” said Shaw, “see to the President. They’re bringing out a stretcher now.”

Evans’s smile faded. “Uh, sir, shouldn’t the professionals...”

“Are you questioning my orders, Lieutenant?”

“No, it’s just...” Evans caught the raised eyebrow from Shaw as the major stood. “No, sir! I’ll take care of it, sir.”

Fraser glanced over at the major as Evans left for the racks to help Franklin to the waiting medics. “Are you sure that’s a good idea, sir?”

Shaw raised another eyebrow, and Fraser held up his hands defensively. “I’m just saying, sir, maybe he’s got a point. The Prez didn’t look so good. How do we know what he’s got? Maybe it’s not the superflu, but can we rule it out?”

Shaw shook his head. “Franklin checked clean when he came through security. No sign of the infection. So either those MPs can’t work a scanner, or it’s not the superflu. Besides, Evans could use a little humility.”

“Agreed, sir. One hundred percent.”

“Right, then let’s get this big bitch unloaded, shall we? Charlie!” Shaw yelled as he headed down the ladder, looking for the loadmaster.

Evans passed through, nearly disappearing under the staggering weight and size of the sick Franklin. He shot Fraser a dirty look that was completely ignored.

Fraser turned and looked out the cockpit windows. He could just see the technicians lining up the laser level on the plane—an easy way to figure out how far the fat-assed C-5 was sinking under its own weight into the ice. More than six inches or so, and she'd have to be moved, just in case.

He looked at all the white outside until his eyes began to hurt, and finally put on his sunglasses.

I hate this place.

Major Shaw knocked on the door of the McMurdo area director's office. The nameplate said 'Reuben Hacker,' but the man behind the desk was clearly not Hacker, given that his uniform said 'Burke' and there were colonel's birds on his lapels.

Burke was of medium height, but well-built. His sandy hair was close-cropped, and he wore rimless glasses, a concession to advancing age. As Burke was the military liaison for McMurdo, Shaw had been expecting to report to him in his own office, but had been redirected here instead.

Shaw saluted as Colonel Burke looked up and stood, coming around the desk and perching on its edge.

"Major Bill Shaw, reporting as ordered, sir."

"Come in, Major," said Burke, returning the salute. "Have a seat. Oh, and get the door."

Shaw shut the door, wondering what the hell was going on, and sat down, looking at the colonel quizzically.

"What I'm about to tell you doesn't leave this room. Clear?" asked Burke.

"Yes, sir."

"I've just had some flash traffic from the world, and you're not going to like it."

"I'm gonna go out on a limb here, sir, and guess that this is why Mr. Hacker isn't in his office at the moment?"

"Got it in one, son. I've been ordered to take immediate command of McMurdo and all US operations on the ice. I've also been

informed that all air traffic—and I mean all—is being grounded, effective immediately.”

Shaw felt like he'd been punched in the gut. “Wait, what? *All* traffic, sir?”

Burke sighed and sat behind his desk once more. “You’ve seen the news, Bill. You know what’s going on. We’ve lost control of this thing. Plans are being put into motion, but they’re not gonna save everyone. And you are *not* clear to divulge that to your men. Hell, even *I’m* not supposed to know.”

“This is a helluva thing, sir. What the hell do I tell my crew?”

“You tell them whatever you have to tell them, Major,” said Burke. “They’re not going home anytime soon. None of us are. Our orders are to sit tight, batten down the hatches, and wait for further word.”

“What about the plane, sir? It’s not going to stay where it’s at—it’ll sink first, break through the ice...”

“The stores that are on board are being moved to the warehouses now. She’ll be empty soon. I’ve already got a crew ready to knock out some walls in one of the bigger warehouses, and I think we can just squeeze her in there. It’ll be tight, and we may have to bulldoze some structures along the way or add on to the one we finally choose, but that’s our only option to get her on solid ground. And we have to keep her; she may be our only way out of here in the end.”

“Yes, sir.”

“See to your men; I’ve designated some rack space in some temporary quarters in Hotel California—what we call our dormitory. Depending on how long this thing goes, we may end up with a bunch more buildings out here. I tell ya, our one saving grace is that you just brought in this load of supplies. We’re gonna need it. Dismissed.”

The tall, graying pilot looked a bit lost. Though he was headed for Hotel California, likely to join his men there, he seemed worlds away, barely even noticing the emergency personnel running by him, let alone the crowd near her office. Jennifer Michaelson, US Marshal, stopped and grabbed his arm, looking him up and down. “You the pilot that just came in?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, your man is tearing apart our infirmary. Come with me.” With strength belying her smaller frame, she dragged Major Shaw into a full-out run.

When they arrived at the infirmary building, there was a crowd outside, stamping their feet and chattering. A couple of security vehicles had lights flashing near the entrance, and two more guards were keeping people out.

Michaelson grabbed Shaw once more and practically threw him at the doors, which the guards opened.

“Ma’am,” one said as she went in, and she grimaced. Even given the circumstances, she was still aggravated when she got called ‘ma’am.’ It made her feel old.

She could hear yelling from up ahead; at least, it sounded like yelling, but it was incoherent. No words. More like moans, really. Shaw began slowing down, and Michaelson started dragging him instead.

“Oh, shit,” Shaw suddenly said, stopping in his tracks entirely.

Michaelson whipped around to face him. “What is it, Major?” she asked, though she was already starting to suspect what he would say.

“Franklin... he was sick when we got on the flight. None of us thought anything of it, since he came through the scanner clean.”

Michaelson shook her head. “You brought a man sick with the *superflu* onto my base? I’ll have your ass for this. For now, we have to deal with it. Go on!”

She shoved him hard, and he stumbled forward. They turned the corner just in time to see another security guard fly across the hallway and slam into the wall. He didn’t get back up. From this angle, Michaelson could just see into the treatment room, and wished to a god she didn’t believe in that she couldn’t.

The patient was strapped to a gurney by one arm and both legs. He had obviously broken out of the first restraint, and was pulling and tugging at the second, roaring and trying to free himself. Covered in sweat, he had blood running in trickles from his nose, ears, and eyes. As he caught sight of Shaw, he roared again, his free hand clutching and grasping at the pilot.

Suddenly, Major Shaw seemed completely calm. Without a word, he grabbed the Taser from Michaelson’s waist, stepped clearly into

the doorway, and fired at Franklin, hitting him right between the eyes. Fifty thousand volts flowed into and through Franklin's brain, and he began twitching, laying still only once the charge had been exhausted.

Shaw moved quickly, releasing the brakes on the gurney's wheels and pulling hard, rolling it into the corridor. "Help me with the other end," he said to Michaelson, indicating the foot of the bed. "We need to get him outside. Now."

Shaw yelled for people to clear the hall as they moved to the side door and down the ramp. He directed the gurney to an empty part of the parking lot next to the building, then locked the brakes on the gurney once more. He glanced around, and seeing a security vehicle nearby, ran over and began pulling equipment out of the back, throwing it on the ground.

Michaelson just looked on in shock; she knew command decisions when she saw them, and this was clearly Shaw's show, as much as she might hate that. She didn't know what would happen next, but she was willing to let it go... at least for the moment.

When he came back and she saw that he was carrying the security vehicle's spare gas canister and two road flares, she started to regret her decision. "What the hell are you—"

"Not now. Step back. Step back!" He began pouring the gasoline on the patient's still form. As the liquid splashed over the man's face, he spluttered and began to regain consciousness, making a sudden grab for Shaw. His huge fist snagged in the pilot's jacket pocket, and he was almost pulled in. Shaw twisted like a snake, more flexible than anything Michaelson had ever seen, and the jacket was suddenly off him, the gas canister lying on its side on the ground. Franklin roared as Shaw picked up the gas can and finished pouring the contents onto the gurney, then threw the can underneath it.

Shaw stepped back as he held one of the road flares, then lit it.

"Stop right there!" Michaelson had let this go far enough, and she was now holding a gun pointed at his head from only a dozen feet away. "Put down the flare!"

"I can't do that," replied Shaw, looking at her steadily, as if he hadn't just poured gasoline over one of his own crewmembers and wasn't about to set him on fire. "You don't understand." He moved to throw the flare.

“Don’t make me shoot you! Drop the flare!”

“I have to do this, or we’re all dead, anyway,” he said. “Shoot if you want.” He tossed the flare onto the gurney, and ducked as the shot she fired went wide.

She couldn’t even hear herself yelling. The fireball was huge, and engulfed the gurney immediately. After a moment, she could hear the roars of the creature that used to be Franklin inside the fire, eventually ceasing as its lungs burned from the inside out.

The smell was horrific, and the major turned to vomit on the cold ground.

Michaelson holstered her pistol and took off her jacket and threw it around Shaw, who struggled for a second until he realized what she was doing. He pulled the jacket the rest of the way on, glancing at her.

“What the hell was that?” she asked.

“You know what it was. The superflu.”

“Bullshit.”

“What?”

“I haven’t exactly heard that burning people alive is a necessary protocol for the superflu. And you didn’t even hesitate, once you laid eyes on him. You have been *trained* to do this. That means you know something we don’t. Something important enough to justify setting a living man on fire. Now spill.”

“You think I *liked* doing this to my friend? I’ve known him for almost six years!” He spun, kicking the empty fuel can across the snow and ice. “Six years! And he’s died the most horrific death I could dream of, and I had to do it, I *had* to, because it wasn’t him anymore.” He leaned against the back bumper of the security jeep.

Jennifer gave him a moment, then walked up to him, laying one hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

He looked up as another vehicle arrived, lit by the light of his friend’s funeral pyre.

Colonel Burke stepped out, and walked over to the pair quickly, sizing up the situation as he did so.

The major was all business once again as he snapped to attention.

“Major?”

“Sir,” said Shaw.

“Are you injured, Major?”

“No, sir.”

“What happened here?”

“Protocol Alpha, sir.”

Burke’s eyebrows rose far enough to high-five his receding hairline. “No shit?”

“No shit. Sir.”

“And he was the only one?”

“As far as I know, sir. We should check Lieutenant Evans, but I don’t believe he was compromised.”

“Very well. I’ll interview the medical staff and double-check. You see to the rest of your men. Report back to me in an hour.” He turned to Michaelson. “And Marshal, none of this gets out. See those gawkers?”

He pointed to the corner of the building, where a few people had started to gather, attracted by the smoke.

“Yes, sir,” said Michaelson.

“Good. And the ones inside. They *will* keep quiet. Get to it, people,” he said, then walked into the infirmary.

Michaelson gave orders to the security men, then turned back to Shaw. “This isn’t over, Shaw,” she said, getting his attention again. “I still want to know what really happened here.”

He glanced over at her. “I can understand that, Marshal...”

“Jennifer. Jennifer Michaelson.”

“Well then, Jennifer, first thing I’d like to do is bury the Prez here.”

She snorted. “You’ve got a lot to learn about Antarctica, Major Shaw.”

“Call me Bill.”

“We don’t bury anything here. Ground’s too hard, even when you can find it under the snow.” She nodded her head toward the bay. “Before all the new ‘green’ regulations, we used to drag it out there and let the ice take it. McMurdo Sound has the dubious distinction of being one of the most polluted waters in the world, Major. Now, we ship most of our waste out. Best we can do is give him a burial at sea.”

Shaw sighed. “Guess that’ll have to do then. I’ll get my guys.”

Jennifer looked at him. “You’re an odd one, Shaw.” She hesitated, then nodded. “Fine, I’ll have a couple of my guys escort you out

there, since you're all newbs. Wouldn't want you falling through the ice."

Shaw turned and headed for Hotel California to find his men.

Z-Day

Civilians were packed in everywhere, jammed into every nook and cranny—the gym, all three bars, the common rooms of every dorm and warehouse. The broadcast was on every satellite channel, overriding every other bit of programming.

Major Bill Shaw, Marshal Jennifer Michaelson, Director Reuben Hacker, and Colonel Simon Burke were watching the broadcast from Hacker's office, neighboring the large common room. And Shaw had never seen a president look so weary.

"What I think you all need is the truth, something you can understand without having a doctorate, something that actually tells you what we're facing here. You deserve to know the truth, so that you can protect yourselves and your families as you see fit. So I'm trusting you with this information, knowing that you will live up to my faith in you. With that in mind, ladies and gentlemen, what we are dealing with is—and I say this with utmost sincerity—zombies."

Shaw could hear shouting from the main room, and more than a little laughter, but the laughter had an edge to it that sounded a little crazy. He glanced over at Jennifer and saw that she'd noticed it, too, but she shook her head at him and pointed to the television, where the president was continuing.

"As you know, this illness is not contained to our corner of the globe. Other nations around the world are being notified at this moment by their leaders, who have been working closely with us since the beginning of this crisis. This disease is a global pandemic. Medical facilities, cities, towns, and even whole countries are being overrun by the infected.

"Many of you are familiar with 'Mad Cow Disease.' The agent which causes this disease—a prion—is a natural protein that has become twisted from its normal form. In the case of this 'new flu,' however, the situation is much more dire. The prion will kill its host within sixteen to twenty-four hours after initial infection. Once dead, the host will then re-animate, and seek out new hosts.

“There is no cure. Once infected, the host will die and reanimate. This process may take more or less time, depending on where on their body the victim was bitten. And yes, the primary mode of transmission is through bites, although any contact with bodily fluids will also result in infection.”

“I don’t have to tell any of you what a zombie is. You’ve seen the movies and TV shows and read the comic books. What we are dealing with here is nothing short of a horror movie come to life. The dead are walking, and they’re hungry.

“However, as bad as this may seem, all is not lost, and even now a long-planned series of actions are taking place to safeguard our way of life. What you see here is a drawing of a bunker, built into the side of a mountain. This bunker will hold thousands of people, including all the food, water, and other facilities necessary to shelter them for up to twenty years. We call this Project Phoenix.

“There are ten such bunkers spread across our nation. These bunkers are at this moment being stocked with supplies, as well as priceless historical and artistic treasures of our culture. Let me be clear. *We will survive*. The human race has resisted every attempt in our long history to destroy us. We will survive this as well. These bunkers have been outfitted with the latest in scientific equipment, and those who are chosen will work night and day to find a cure, a way for us to return to the surface of our world, and to save those left behind.

“As of now, martial law is declared in the United States of America. All borders are closed, all airports and seaports are locked down. No unauthorized travel is permitted by air, land, or sea. Stay in your homes. Await your selection notification. Isolate the infected. Violence against military personnel or each other will be dealt with swiftly and harshly. Looting of any kind will be considered a capital crime.”

Standing tall again, the president looked at the cameras one last time. “We will survive. We will go on. Life will prevail. In this, our darkest hour, I pray that God is with us all. Thank you.”

Shaw looked over at Jennifer and Director Hacker, who were stunned. He didn’t glance at Colonel Burke, since the colonel had already known.

Jennifer finally came to her senses, and looked back at him. “You knew,” she said. “You knew before you even landed.”

Shaw shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I was... some of us were cleared for additional information ahead of time, just in case. And in this case, it turned out to be a damned good thing we were!”

She shook her head. “Whatever.”

He thought she might have said something else, but the noise in the other room started rising, followed by a sobbing wail that cut through the rest.

Jennifer had bolted from her chair and was running before Shaw could even blink. He and the colonel reached the main room just as there was a loud crack from a pistol.

“Quiet!” shouted Jennifer, though there was not a peep from anyone in the room at this point. Someone—probably the person who had screamed a moment ago—was sobbing softly in the crowd, but everyone’s eyes were glued to the marshal and the gun in her hand.

She waited for a moment, then holstered the weapon. “I know you’re all in shock. I am, too. What we need to remember is that we’re all going to get through this, but only if we work together. No one here is sick,” she said, looking pointedly at Shaw, who met her stare without flinching. “No one here is a zombie. They’d freeze solid here, anyway. So settle down. Go back to your dorms. Get some shuteye. Take the day off.”

People began to stand, pulling up others who’d fallen or were otherwise frozen in place.

“There will be another announcement in the morning,” said Colonel Burke, stepping into the room. “All personnel are to watch the station news at 1000 hours. Now get some rest, everyone. That’s an order.”

Shaw could see some people bristle at the idea of a military man giving them orders, but Director Reuben Hacker began circulating through the room, talking to folks and calming them down. He appeared to be well-liked in the community, which meant his help would be invaluable in the weeks and months ahead.

Shaw glanced at Burke, who shrugged, ever so slightly. None of them knew how long they’d be there. Still, survival was survival, regardless of the crap happening back in the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Kristopher was born in Waco, Texas, and spent the first years of his life moving with his family around northern Texas and the Panhandle, including Lubbock. After settling with his family in northern Colorado, Jason spent nearly two decades there soaking up the creative energy and enjoying the beautiful weather, before moving back to Texas for “real” work.

Jason currently lives in Houston and enjoys reading, writing, movies, music (live and not), the Houston Astros (winning and not), singing karaoke and the Texas hill country, especially the vineyards.

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The zombie apocalypse isn't coming... it's already here.

“Jason Kristopher is back with exactly the second installment we've all been hoping for. This book has no fluff or filler, but tons of destruction, carnage, love, hope, and zombies (and what better combination is there?). A highly engaging read you won't want to put down.”

— H. C. H. Ritz, author of *The Lightbringers*

Becoming a zombie was much more painful than he had expected.

The world has ended, and the few who are left struggle to survive. They had hoped that the worst thing they would have to deal with in this new world would be the walkers, come to rip and devour. They were wrong. There are worse things than zombies.

Those once thought safely sheltered in massive bunkers are under ceaseless attack or have gone dark—or worse. Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, marooned on the desert ice of Antarctica, a dwindling group of scientists fend off starvation. David Blake and the US military launch a desperate rescue mission to bring them back—among them, the one scientist who has the knowledge that could save the human race.



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